

# Our Mothers in the Faith: God's Gazelles

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May 12, 2019

## Psalm 23; John 10:27-30; Acts 9:36-43

Rachel Held Evans was a gifted young blogger, author, and speaker who helped a whole generation hold onto Jesus and even his imperfect church.

Raised in a conservative Christian home and church, Rachel became disenchanted with all the ways her church excluded and vilified those who fell outside its cultural norms. In the process, she became a firebrand for a Jesus-centric faith that welcomed all comers, including women as leaders, LGBTQ persons, and persons of color. Sadly, Ms. Evans died just over a week ago of an illness that went terribly wrong, leaving behind a devastated husband and two small children.

In the wake of Rachel's passing, the internet erupted with expressions of grief and gratitude for her life. Stories poured in around the hash tag, *#becauseofrhe*. One blogger wrote, "(Rachel) was a constant source of encouragement, cheering me on with (the Hebrew) *eshet chayil*!--"woman of valor"--whenever I wrote something on the internet that some people (mostly men, it seemed) didn't like." Said another, "For many of us, she opened doors we never could have opened ourselves. The least we could do, in her honor, is to try to open a few more along the

way.” Yes, Rachel died much too young at 37, but clearly others will carry on her work and witness.

Rachel Held Evans is one in a long line of strong, inspiring women who have shaped our lives and faith, those “women of valor” she heralded in her writings. Some are featured in the Bible such as Sarah, who dared to laugh at God, Miriam, who sang the song of victory by the sea, and Deborah, the prophet and judge, who saved Israel in a time of peril.

And who can forget the heroic young Mary, the mother of Jesus, or Martha who insisted on studying at Jesus’ feet instead of being shooed back into the kitchen, or those faithful women who were the first heralds of our Lord’s?

And then in our own lives, other spiritual mothers and sisters have shaped and formed us in the way of Jesus. These include the loving, nurturing mamas in the church who cradled and caressed us in the nursery, taught us in Sunday School and Bible School, and modeled faithful, loving service in the church and world.

And some of us--not all, but some of us--were blessed to have a mother at home who brought the kingdoms of heaven and earth together in a place of nurturing, guidance, and love truly worthy to be called a “Christian home.” And that is why for me, the Spanish proverb has long proved true: “An ounce of mother is worth a ton of priest”

Our New Testament lesson from Acts features one such mother in the faith, a sort of first century Rachel Held Evans. Her name is *Dorcas*, in the Greek, and Tabitha in Aramaic, the local dialect of Jesus’ place and time. Interestingly, both names mean “gazelle,” an animal noted in the bible for its nimbleness, grace, and beauty.

According to the book of Acts, Dorcas was “devoted to good works and acts of charity.” Central to her loving service was taking the church’s widows under her wings. Widows were a vulnerable class in ancient societies because they had no husband or father to stand up for them in a world where men called the shots.

But the early church, like its mother-faith, Judaism, had a special place in its heart for widows. They were considered among the weak and lowly where, according to Jesus, the kingdom of God is found.

Dorcas was probably a widow herself since no husband is mentioned. In all events, Dorcas was not just a kind, caring, behind-the-scenes presence. She is explicitly called a *disciple*; meaning she is a prominent leader in the church.

To me, Dorcas calls to mind all those mothers and sisters in the faith who teach us the way of Jesus. Some of this teaching and modeling unfolds in quiet, assuming service, like the beautiful quilt my sister, Linda, showed me on Friday. She was propped up in an arm chair, with a huge cast on her ankle, from a recent surgery. Linda held up a hand-sewn multi-colored quilt and said with obvious gratitude and joy, "This was given to me by the Sew and So's at church."

That was not the first time someone recovering from surgery has shown me a gift from our church's Sew n So's, be it a heart-shaped pillow to clutch after open-heart surgery or a knee blanket to beat back the chill, just like the widows in the story of Dorcas showing Peter the items she made for them.

Who are the women in your faith journey or family who showed up with a quilt or casserole, when you needed a very human embodiment of God's more than human love? For me, the first was my own mother, who snuggled me close while telling me the stories of the Bible. She didn't have any web sites or DVDs to help, just a dog-eared copy of a children's Bible story book. But in her earnest, excited tones, the stories of Sampson and David, Ruth and Mary Madeleine, became rivetingly, palpably alive.

Maybe your mother or sister in the faith taught you "caring for the least of these" was the heart of following Jesus. And not just with words, but by taking you to volunteer at the soup kitchen or homeless shelter, or marching beside you in the "M. L. KING, JR." march, or some outpouring of prayer and protest demanding a biblical-style justice.

Maybe one of God's gazelles to you was Rachel Held Evans, or Madeline L'engle, or Mary Oliver, or Ann Lamont--or Knollwood's own Peggy Haymes who wrote the lyrics to the last hymn in today's service--or any number of other women writers who opened up new ways of imagining and even feeling the beating heart of God.

All I know is that we dare not speak of God the *Father* without also speaking of *Mother* Church. Or better yet, acknowledging that the God who draws near in Jesus is at times more like a mother than any father most of us have known. Jesus is the good shepherd who tenderly cares for the sheep, even when that means--in the words of the 23rd psalm--"making me to lie down in green pastures," a phrase that recalls for me all those times as a boy that my mother *made me lie down* and take a nap, whether I wanted one or not!

Yes, on this Mother's Day--the fourth Sunday of Easter on the church's calendar--we give thanks for Dorcas, and others of God's gazelles, who have proclaimed and embodied God's love for us and for all the world.

But suddenly, the story of Dorcas takes a sinister turn. Dorcas falls ill and dies. Deeply grieved widows in Dorcas' flock gather 'round and start preparing her body for burial, much like the women in the Gospels go to anoint the body of Jesus on Easter Sunday morning. Meanwhile, a posse is sent to fetch the Apostle Peter from a nearby village to see if there's anything he can do.

When Peter arrives, he is taken to an upstairs room where the body is laid out. The widows show Peter the clothes and tunics Dorcas made for them.

Eventually, Peter clears the room. He kneels beside the bed and begins to pray. Then, confident the Risen One is near, Peter turns to the body and says, "Tabitha, get up." It's a page right out of Jesus' play book where he says to Jarius' daughter in Mark chapter 5, "Talitha cum," meaning, "Little girl, get up!"

At the sound of Peter's voice, Tabitha's eyes flutter open. She turns to see Peter and sits up in surprise. He takes her by the hand and helps Tabitha--a.k.a. Dorcas--to her feet.

It is a dramatic and inspiring story; but also infuriating in a way. Because what happens to Jarius' daughter in the Gospels, and what happens to Dorcas in the story, never happens to us. When our beloved mother, or sister, or other loved one, dies, we don't get them back. We're just left with the clothes they wore, which maybe we press to our faces in hopes of feeling their nearness or catching a whiff of the scent they left behind. But for us, there is no miraculous rising, at least not this side of glory.

But as Christians, we dare to believe that Jesus is as good as his word. So when he promises, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me," that is not just a promise about *this* life, but the *next*. Indeed, in the very next verse, Jesus presses the point home, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

I take that to mean that some eternal upstairs room--in some other dimension of reality, we don't have the capacity to see or fathom--Jesus says to our mother, or father, or other loved one lost, "Dorcas, Belva, Tim, Frank, Betsy, or Manford, *Get Up.*"

"Talitha cum," "Child of God, *Get Up!*". . . And they do!

Recently, some months after my mom died, my older sister, Susan, had a disturbing, yet comforting dream. In fact, I would call it a vision because that's the Bible's language for a revelation so riveting, one is not sure if he or she is awake or asleep.

In the dream, or vision, my mom was peering into the back seat of an old, black Rambler station wagon that ferried us about as were children. Mom was looking in at her three children, Susan, Bobby, and Linda from outside the raised back door of that station wagon.

Mom was wearing a pretty, red, single-piece bathing suit, and appeared happy and whole, radiant and beautiful. In my sister's words, "Her color was great. She wasn't impaired. Her face, eyes, and mouth were smiling . . . (and) she glowed with joy."

Then mom looked directly at my sister, locking both eyes and heart, and said, “Susie, everything I told you all about Jesus and the life to come . . . is true”

My sister awoke with a start, trembling with both faith and fear. But now she had seared on her heart, a confidence, not there before: the confidence that on the far side of death, all is well with our mom: “Because everything she and Jesus told us . . . is true.”

No, in this life, we don’t always get the happy ending we long for. Dorcas was raised by the power of God; Rachel Held Evans was not.

But as disciples of Jesus, what we do get is the growing confidence that death is not the end. We come to hope, and more and more to believe, that the great promise of Revelation 7:17 is true: “The lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

And in the hard times between now and then, we count on God’s gazelles to show up and help see us through.

We have a beautiful quilt in our family room that dates from 19th century. It was sewn by Bambi’s great, great grandmother, Granny Wagoner.

Just before the civil war, Granny Wagoner’s husband built a new house for the family over in Thomasville. In July of 1862, he joined a North Carolina regiment and headed north to engage the enemy. That fall, he died in the blood bath that was Antietam.

Granny Wagoner, now a widow, turned her new home into a boarding house and raised her 3-year-old daughter, Betty, alone. In time, Betty grew up to give her mother a grandson. Sadly, Betty died of TB the day before her son turned one.

So Granny Wagoner sewed a quilt from the tattered remnants of her grief and loss and wrapped her little one within it from time to time. Then she raised him to adulthood.

That little boy grew up to become Papa Kennedy, the grandfather Bambi adored.

Today, all we have from Granny Wagoner is the quilt she sewed on one of many long, lonely nights, a widow trying to hold on in a sometimes cruel, scary world. But despite the hardships, she built a nest where first her daughter and then her grandson learned to fly. And she left behind a quilt, peppered with woven hearts, so they -- and we - would remember.

Oh, by the way. Granny Wagoner's given name? Her name . . . was *Gazelle*.

God's gazelles are the women who help us believe when life is caving in all around us. They keep on caring and serving and bearing witness in good times and bad, for they are an Easter people.

And they know something the shakers and movers in this world don't know or are prone to forget: that Jesus lives. And he lives not just as an inspiring memory, but as the ever-present Good Shepherd who guides and sustains with a fierce, determined love.

And nothing in life or death can snatch us from his hand!

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*Gracious God, on this Mother's Day--the fourth Sunday of Easter--we give thanks for those mothers and sisters in the faith who showed and taught us the way of Jesus. And we are grateful beyond words that even when they can no longer be with us, they are with you.*

*Now make us strong in the confidence that the Risen One walks beside us in the life that is yet ours to live. Embolden us in the confidence that nothing can ever snatch us from his hand.*

*In Jesus' name, as always, we pray. Amen.*